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Goffman's Front Stage and Backstage Behaviours in Online Education

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ABSTRACT: This research applies Goffman's Presentation of Self in Everyday Life to analyze online and offline student participation in two online subjects. Mixed-methods will be used to produce a fuller account of student experiences.

KEYWORDS: Participation, online education, Goffman, online, offline

1. MOTIVATION

In order to fully understand and optimize learning and the environment in which it occurs, both online and offline spaces utilized by the learner should be researched. These spaces can include the learning world, the work world, the home world, and other optional worlds (Haythornthwaite & Kazmer, 2004). In order to account for these worlds, I will apply Goffman's (1959) concepts of front stage and backstage behaviours.

2. BACKGROUND

In Goffman's study of the Shetland Hotel, he found that an employee's front stage (in the restaurant) and backstage (in the kitchen) were parts of the "whole individual" separated by a kitchen door. Similarly in online education, the student's front stage (in the LMS) and backstage (online and offline) are parts of the "whole student" separated by a login page. Previous studies have used Goffman to produce a fuller account of how Internet users engage across the backstage and front stage spaces (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Hogan, 2010; Pearson, 2009; Ross, 2007; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). My research applies and extends Goffman's stages to include:

1. **Front stage online:** The space where an online student gives a performance. This space can be "seen" by the university; for example, the online discussion board and student activity logs.
2. **Backstage online:** A space where an online student prepares for a performance using the Internet but cannot be seen by the university; for example, websites, Facebook, and email.
3. **Backstage offline:** A space where an online student prepares for a performance without an Internet connection; for example, in a Word document, in face-to-face conversations, and in self-talk.

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These stages will be analyzed to answer the following research question: How does student engagement with backstage spaces, online and offline, increase or decrease engagement in the front stage space?

3. METHODS

A mixed method design permits the findings from one method to elaborate the findings from another method (Caracelli & Greene, 1993; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). Smaller scale studies in learning analytic research demonstrate that surveys add depth to the data (Black, Dawson, & Priem, 2008) and interviews help data tell a story (Saadatmand & Kumpulainen, 2014).

This study will recruit second-year university students from both a discursive subject and a computational subject: Psychology and Engineering. By including an Engineering subject, it will fill a gap in the literature of online education where Engineering is underrepresented (Allen & Seaman 2008). The methods used to collect data from each stage are outlined below:

- **LMS activity logs:** The activity logs in this study will be used to identify participation patterns and trends in front stage activities across the 12-week subjects. This information will help to confirm that students from across the participation spectrum are included in the study. Students can add depth to their activity logs during the interview and by completing questionnaires.
- **Student self-reporting questionnaires:** Students will be asked to complete questionnaires every two weeks during the 12-week subject. The questionnaire will ask students to recount subject-related activities they engaged in backstage offline and backstage online. The backstage data from the questionnaire can help to elaborate upon inactivity in the front stage. The results from the survey will also help to inform questions for the in-depth semi-structured interviews.
- **Content analysis of the discussion board activities:** For the purpose of this research, the discussion board is the front stage. At the end of the 12-week subject, the discussion board will be coded using Nvivo. The themes from this data will be compared to the interview data.
- **In-depth semi-structured interviews:** This study will use in-depth semi-structured interviews in order to learn about the students' point of view and back stage. Students will have the option to interview using email, video conferencing, chat, telephone, and if their location permits, face-to-face. Interview data will also be coded using Nvivo. Themes and patterns from interviews and the discussion board data will be analyzed using an axial comparison.

4. RESULTS

Comparing the reification and participation patterns from the front stage and backstage will identify performances that occur solely within one stage and performances that occur in multiple stages. This will help to illustrate where students are engaging outside of the front stage, with whom, and under what circumstances.

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In the first round of data collection, interviews explained the reason for a drop in front stage participation. For example, a Facebook learning community formed backstage online. The group elected one student to liaise between the front stage and backstage online. As a result, six students stopped engaging in the front stage. In addition, students who were disconnected from online classmates in the front stage were regularly discussing content backstage offline at work or with family members and partners. For example, it was revealed through questionnaires and interviews that three different sibling groups were studying the same course and they opted to study with each other in the backstage offline space rather than participate in the front stage.

5. CONTRIBUTION

Backstage data has the potential to add depth to the interpretation of front stage data or the lack thereof. Multiple worlds play a role in the student experience and therefore need to play a role in the learning sciences. Learning analytics and conventional research methods, therefore, must work together to improve engagement in online education and research the “whole student”.

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